

Ethics, Prince Charles and the Modernists

Charles Jencks

It is one of the sad truths of our time that Modernism, based on egalitarian ideals and reason, has ended up supporting selfishness. Despite its good intentions, its cultural agenda has encouraged opportunism and, through its Nietzschean strain, justified power as the supreme arbiter and final value. Modernism with one root in the French Revolution, another in the Enlightenment and a third in Darwinism, has not supplied an ethical system which transcends the market-place. Its suppositions that creativity depends on destruction – the logic of capitalist production and the Shock of the New – leave it an easy accomplice to cultural genocide. Indeed, as the sociologist Zygmunt Baumann has shown in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989, its suppositions of efficiency and instrumental reason made it a partial agent in physical genocide.

Traditional systems of value and ethics have not fared much better. Often victims of fundamentalism, they prove unable to adapt to a fast-changing global culture and its assumptions of pluralism. In Britain Prince Charles has been the spokesman for tradition since his 1984 intervention in the architectural debate, but he has not faced the central ethical question: who speaks for the public in a diverse, conflictual society? Or specifically, what justifies imposing one's taste in a pluralist situation such as the design for the re-building of Paternoster area around St. Paul's Cathedral in London? Such political and ethical questions were asked with increasing frequency in the 1980's.

Elected officials are trained in the use and abuse of power, but architects and Prince Charles, untutored in the subject, often have hat to do their learning in public. Any politician in a democracy can recognize a conflict of interest and knows the ends do not justify the means, yet architects and Prince Charles are often disarmed when these simple propositions of civil life are applied to their actions. One bad turn, they claim, justifies another.

For instance, if you are naive enough, as I was, to question the way the Prince may use the two hundred or so journalists who follow his architectural wald-about, hanging on his every jibethat is if you hear? That it is only a fair response to previously foul play. For fifty years, so the argument goes, Modernists have been appointing each other to seats of power in British architecture, for the main roles at the RIBA, for the chief positions in the schools of architecture and, most seriously, for the major commissions, over which they have considerable influence. Competitions, supposedly open like democratic elections, are usually skewed towards the profession, and in Britain that means Modernists.

Such semi-conspiracy theories I have heard many times, and most notably from the editor of the *London Times*, Simon Jenkins, and the Prince's chief architect, Leon Krier. They are born out by the statistics, by the disproportionately large number of Modernist buildings built and professors appointed – compared with the relatively small proportion of the general public who hold Modernist views. These conspiracy theories also explain why, in the summer of 1991, Prince Charles withdrew his support for a Scottish museum competition even before the results were announced. He presumed the jury was already fixed against public opinion and in favour of a Modernist solution. In the architectural Cold War, the enemy is assumed to be duplicitous.



Questionable tactics are not only directed at an ideological opponent, but also at a competitor. One of the most successful architects in 19th century America, H. H. Richardson, supposedly said that 'the First Principle of architecture ist to get the job', a high ideal of capitalist ethics further refined by Eero Saarinen's addition. 'The Second Principle ist to keep it'. Vitruvius gives some lurid examples of what an ambitious architect will do to gain employment – such as oil his body and dress up in leopard skins – and there are many equivalents in recent times. For instance, although the Modernists portrayed themselves as pure-hearted opponents of fascism, Walter Gropius wrote an unsavoury letter to Goebbels in 1934 defending the 'Germanness' of the new architecture. Le Corbusier wrote, at about the same time, to Mussolini recommending his own architecture for that regime (before working for the Petain administration) and Mies van der Rohe worked on Nazi projects up to 1937. When I mentioned all this compromise and collaboration to Philip Johnson in the early 1970s he said: 'How apolitical can you get? If the devil himself offered Mies a job he would take it'.

In the early 1980s, Johnson-obviously trying to outdo his mentor as Mephistopheles, boasted about his ability to get one skyscraper after another: in Boston, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Denver, etc. 'I am', he said on more than one occasion, 'a whore'. No one contradicted him, and for this uncommon candour (uncommon among architects, not Johnson) a Boston skyscraper was immediately wrenched from his hands and given to that paragon of self-effacement, Robert Stern, who built it.

Such is the state of architectural justice.

Those with a developed sense of irony might observe that if architects treat clients and cities with a certain opportunistic contempt, at least they also treat each other the same way. When Frank Gehry and Skidmore Owings and Merrill invited Norman Foster to collaborate on a multi-billion dollar project for the Kings Cross area of London, Foster not only worked with them, but went back to his own office, redesigned the master plan and wooed away the client. Shocking? Unethical? The ends justify the means? Richardson's

First Principle have we become. It is against this high moral background that Prince Charles' recent intervention in the architectural debate may be judged.

The Holy War

The Prince, as everyone knows who has not escaped media bombardment, has been attacking Modern architects for eight years. I have written an analysis of this attack, a book called *The Prince, the Architects and New Wave Monarchy*, which comes to the unexceptional conclusion that, on the whole, the Prince's intervention in the architectural debate was, up to June 1988, marginally positive. He made the debate more public, defended three minorities needing defense – Community architecture, Classicism, Conservation (the three C's) – and started to define a new role for future royalty which is freer to intervene in public issues. „New Wave Monarchy“ I called is, ironically, to bring out its Modernist agenda, the fact that the Prince is behaving very like Le Corbusier and the traditional avant-garde in forcing his revolutionary message on the presently Modernist Establishment.

But by 1988 the Holy War of Words reached gruesome proportions. Fully-armed metaphors flew about intent on vaporizing the Modernist enemy for its „glass stump“ or „incinerator“, while a Royal Gold Medalist – subject to this first strike – countered with a missile marked „Prince Charles = Stalin“ (Berthold Lubetkin's comparison, if not exact words). In late October when Prince Charles' film *Vision of Britain* went out on BBC to almost seven million viewers, he damned Sir Denys Lasdun's Royal National Theatre as a „nuclear power station“, Colin St. John Wilson's British Library as „an academy for the secret police“ and James Stirling's proposal for the Mansion House site on Poultry Street as on an „old 1930's wireless“. This last barb was an intentional intervention in a public inquiry, a democratic process which the Prince – when it suits his taste – otherwise strongly supports. It brought the relatively muted reply from Stirling:

I do not accept his flip comment about our design for No. 1 Poultry ... nor do I think it proper that he should – for the second time – influence the outcome of a democratic Public Inquiry process for this site“.

„Democracy ... process“, is there such a thing? The Prince's first foray into architectural criticism in 1984 was made in front of the then environment secretary, Patrick Jenkin, who was about to make a ruling on his inspector's reports for the proposed extension of Britain's National Gallery and a notorious new office block in the city of London. On hearing the Prince's two characterizations – Mies van der Rohe's proposal as a „glass stump“ and ABK's as a „monstrous carbuncle“ – Jenkin whispered to his neighbour, „Well, that's two decisions I don't have to make“ – and he quickly quashed both. Thus two words from the Prince managed to overturn an inspector's report and the supposedly objective results of an open public process.

In spite of such behavior, most architects (two-thirds of those polled in early 1988 by the widely read magazine *Building Design*) thought the Prince should keep speaking out on architecture – and were willing to excuse his overstatement – but they hoped he would widen his tastes and group of advisors. In affect most architects, James Stirling included, agreed with his attack on ugliness and the prevalent mean-spirited development: they had been saying much the same thing for twenty years. Thus a clear opportunity existed, when the Prince made *Vision of Britain*, for a united front to be forged with the profession and a real change made in the architectural climate. Instead the Prince indulged in further Modernist-bashing, attacked architects of quality, and intervened in two democratic processes: the Mansion House Inquiry and the Paternoster Development north of St. Paul's Cathedral.

The Prince continued to intervene undemocratically because he claimed to have the people on his side, a claim which looks true at first. Over six million viewers watched his 1988 film (about five

times the number that watched other programmes in the series) and, according to an unofficial poll, 75.5 percent agreed with his critique of Modern buildings. His television ratings were higher than any other performer except David Attenborough of *Wildlife*, and apparently the flood of mail received after this performance gave him near unanimous support. This was precisely what he asked for, a clear indication that he „wasn't alone in having these opinions“.

Prince Charles is conducting what he calls a popular „crusade“ for „ordinary people“, and he is such a fervent believer in democracy that he had said even Monarchy „can be a kind of elective institution. After all, if people don't want it, they won't have it“. His radical egalitarianism extends to supporting ethnic minorities, Pakistani and Indian communities within Britain, hiring Blacks to work at Buckingham Palace and within other traditional preserves of white privilege. His attacks on Modern architects have always had a similar ethical basis. They were either justified because they expressed a populist opinion, the taste of „ordinary people“, or those of a helpless minority. Hence the strong injunction for client power; architects and planners should „provide what people want and not what they think people should want“ (his emphasis).

This is obviously an ethical position. Every individual, family or group should be able to live in a house, of flat, or their taste and every architect should try to determine the tastes of his or her ultimate client. There may be economic or physical constraints which hinder these goals, but in a democratic country where freedom of movement is possible, they are assumed as an underlying right.

But the Prince has not quite lived up to his professed goals. He will support democratic public inquiries only when they come up with populist decisions, and a building that suits his own taste. There are several examples of his interventions which prove this point, such as the Stirling proposal for Poultry Street, but I will look at only one in detail, his entry into the development proposed for the Paternoster area north of St. Paul's Cathedral.

St. Paul's Cathedral – The Debate

In this long-running saga, which started in 1987, a very complex process of public consultation was followed. Every vested interest was given a chance to influence the design: the Dean of St. Paul's city planning officials, a jury who picked a winner from a closed competition, the inhabitants of the area who came to an exhibition showing two schemes, and the Prince – who was consulted by the developers both behind the scenes and formally. The process has been so long and convoluted with uncertainties that already the site has been sold on four times: developers are not sure that democratic design pays.

The brief facts of the case are these. A consortium of developers, led by Stuart Lipton, set up a closed competition which was won by Arup Associates with Richard Rogers as a possible collaborator. The schemes of all seven competitors were shown, informally, to the Prince who, by that time, July 1987, had emerged as an unofficial but important part of the planning apparatus. Any scheme on a site as sensitive as Paternoster would need his tacit blessing – or so most astute developers might assume.

In the event, the Prince did not like any of the seven designs and, through informal meetings with Leon Krier, Dan Cruickshank, John Simpson and a host of advisors, he helped the development of a 'counter scheme'. This was finally designed by John Simpson, sponsored by the *Evening Standard*, promoted by a heterogeneous group of Classicists and traditionalists, and placed in opposition to Arup's proposal. The notion of the 'counterscheme', an urbanist invention of the 1960's, is a perfectly valid democratic tactic and it would have so remained had it not been surreptitiously supported from behind the palace walls.

Thus started an unequal horse-race with two runners: Arup's schematic plan for the site and Simpson's detailed wooden model with all its classical certainties. Arup, led by Philip Dowson, did not show a detailed solution precisely because he wanted to pose questions to the public – not answers. Simpson, supported by the Evening Standard as the Prince's favourite, scored a media victory when both schemes were shown to the public in June 1988. But since a public vote was never taken – and could not be because of the unequal stages of design development – each side could claim popular support: the Arup design because most people liked its basic assumptions and the Simpson scheme because, in his private poll, most people said they preferred it to the undeveloped proposal. Is this a farce?

Not entirely. A quasi-democracy is better than none at all, and in this case, by November 1988 when the final Arup design was shown, it produced a consensus on the important points. The fact that Arup's and Simpson's designs ended up rather similar in typology shows the consensus. And this could have occurred only with constant interaction and debate, a quasi democratic process that went on for more than a year.

In this case it has led the developers and Arup to reduce the density of building to acceptable levels, something they would not have done without the intervention of the counter-scheme and Leon Krier's constant criticism. Their plan shows a series of small blocks scaled to the cathedral on one side and the commercial street on the other. Eight storey blocks step down to four storeys as they approach Wren's building. The democratic process also encouraged a set of positive urban features such as pedestrian spaces connected by a long curving arcade, and a sequence of squares and small streets that give angled glimpses of the cathedral. It also clarified the need for mixed uses – commercial, retail and leisure – only housing is still absent. And perhaps one may credit it with the idea of a hybrid but common aesthetic, the notion that different architects should adopt a general Free Style Classicism appropriate to the area. The Arup scheme was a partial vindication of quasi-democratic design.

But the Prince was not going to accept it, especially since he was the unofficial of the counter-scheme. In his Manison House speech of 1987, which was also televised and widely reported he said:

'There was another plan on display – by John Simpson, an architect, who works within the classical tradition. His starting point was the original street pattern and his buildings defer to St. Paul's. The public certainly seem to prefer the traditional materials and the far more human scale of Simpson's scheme.'

But did the public prefer Simpson's scheme? It was impossible to tell, because the Gallup Poll and Simpson's private poll were measuring two different and unequal things: an Arup masterplan which was proposing general strategies so that the public could have a significant input in design choices, and the finished product of Simpson. It was natural for the Prince to gloss over this distinction, but wrong to imply that the public preferred Simpson's design. Perhaps this is why he uses the phrase „seem to prefer“.

He went on to defend Simpson against the accusation of 'pastiche' and the idea that one cannot clothe a modern office building with all its ducts and cables behind a traditional facade, concluding this not very illuminating defense with the assertion: „Well, I've looked into this, and you can“. You can house an up-to-date office behind a Neo-Georgian facade, as Quinlan Terry had just proved to the Nation with his Richmond scheme, a development that had a much publicized opening, by the Queen, several weeks earlier. Finally The Prince summarized his discussion with a vicious comparison: *'Paternoster Square has become central to the argument between modernist and traditional architecture, or as I'd rather put it, it's the argument between the inhuman and the human.'*

Here is the rare case of a statement that is probably unethical, and surprisingly for a supporter of religious tradition, unChristian. The characterization of Modernists, or Philip Dowson's architecture, as 'inhuman' did nothing to further the debate. Was it probably meant to outrage most architects, and thereby to further arouse partisan support? Coming from the Prince in front of six million viewers, it was meant to seal the fate of Modernists, and, not surprisingly, it provoked them to compare his tactics with those of Hitler and the Fascists. In the architectural Cold War it upped the stakes and lowered the discourse.

This was very apparent the following year when the Prince's film was turned into a book and exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I had the (mis)fortune to chair what was called 'The Official Debate' at the Victoria and Albert in (November?) 1989. It degenerated into name-calling, and showed very clearly the kind of climate which the Prince's attack had created. On my right, Lucinda Lambton and Leon Krier were pitted against Martin Pawley and Sandy Wilson sitting to the left. Once the debate started, I could not help remembering the origins of 'left- and right-wing' – categories architecturally determined by the seating positions of the two opposing camps in the Estates General during the French Revolution.

I do not remember who threw the first metaphor that night, but Prince Charles was compared to Pol Pot, „then a Modernist to Honecker; then the Prince of Wales to Stalin“, then a Modernist to Ceausescu, then the Prince to Hitler, then ... I should have declared the meeting closed at that point. For the next two hours brought little light and much blood, all of which was amplified the next day in the national press and television.

But there was one positive result: the vote at the end of the evening showed that the audience of over three hundred generally approved of the Prince's intervention, but questioned his taste, and disliked his tactics. By an overwhelming majority they supported his focusing of public opinion on architecture; but by a vote of two to one they rejected his stylistic preferences, and by two and a half to one they disapproved of his methods of influencing planning decisions.

This was a very interesting conclusion since it showed that, given enough information and debate, the public was often ahead of the contestants when it came to making distinctions. It could separate the Prince's somewhat reactionary tastes from his positive publicizing of architecture, and both of these things from his manipulation of the press and developers. In this sense the voters were much more sophisticated and scrupulous than either the Modernists of the Prince, who continued to confuse means and ends.

This last confusion became most apparent when the Paternoster site was sold, once again, to further sets of developers and was purchased by a consortium from three different countries – Japan, America and Britain. The price paid in (May 1990?) was an inflated (pound 170 million). This was so high that it made overbuilding a near certainty. Ironically then, the Prince's intervention, intended to lower the density had delayed development, increased costs and produced a spiral of bidding which made increased density an economic necessity – especially as the country started to move into economic decline.

In the summer of that year the new owners made several informal trips to the Prince's country house, Highgrove, and asked what kind of architecture he might like for the site. Here they appeared, cap-in-hand, wondering which way royal taste would swing. Away from John Simpson? Hardly, since Prince Charles had supported the counter-scheme from the start. Yet Simpson was too inexperienced and also too publicly tied to the Prince for him to become the sole master planner; so a compromise solution was adopted with Tery Farrell, and his large, experienced office as the main planners and the Simpson design as the underlying model. Simpson himself was included in a mixed team of traditionalists, such

als Quinlan Terry and Demetri Porphyrios, and post-modern classicists such as Farrel and Tom Beeby (the Dean of the Yale School of Architecture). With this hybrid group it seemed for a moment as if classical revivalism, and the Prince's tastes, were not a foregone conclusion.

In the event, after much delay and time spent on costly models and eighteenth century perspective, the whole shabby affair drew to its farcical conclusion. All the architects underperformed and produced compromised designs. The classical revivalists looked pretentious, Edwardian, fat (as they had to be for economic reasons) and uptight.

The post-modern classicists were equally stiff and uncreative. Not since the collaborative fiasco of Lincoln Center in New York City, 1961, had such good architects produced such bad schemes. And the reasons were a similar combination of fear, outside pressure brought by a public figure, and a sensitive urban context with contrary demands. This lethal cocktail usually kills good architecture.

The press vacillated in its support. Naturally the Evening Standard backed its original Trojan horse, and naturally the architectural press condemned the lot as pastiche: the Royal Fine Arts Commission, after a bit of high-wire balancing by Lord St. John Stevas, finally fell against the latest proposal. Its fate, in any case, may have been sealed by the recession. What was the point in developing the area, since each developer, given the allowed square footage, was likely to lose thirty million pounds? As many whispered, that was a lot to pay, even for a knighthood.

The circle was thus complete, and vicious. Prince Charles who at first defended the common man against the elitism of the profession, now ended up controlling both ends of a process so that democratic design was impossible. He could influence public opinion, the BBC and national press through his position as a media monarch and, behind the scenes, he could tell developers and architects what to build. Not since the 18th century had a royal such influence over the architectural totality, and yet, even with this power, he could control neither the architectural profession, nor the growing recession.

Clearly this leads to a situation no one wants. Back in 1987 when Paternoster was being opened to democratic debate, the main developer asked me during a lull in the hostilities, „which groups should be consulted?“ I answered, „the local inhabitants and users as well as the tourists and travellers outside Britain – after all St. Paul's is a 'world Building' belonging to everyone“. He replied, „air conditioning would be easier“ - that is leave the old, much disliked Modern slabs on their wind-swept plaza and renovate them. This seems, in 1992, the most likely outcome of the Prince's intervention. And what about Arup's scheme, the only one to win a competition and attempt to face the public in a discourse of design and counter-design? This, in effect, was cancelled by a combination of Princely power and unwise speculation. Very few voices were raised at the unethical nature of these events perhaps because daily politics and the world of Robert Maxwell, BCCI, and the savings and loans fiasco furnishes much bigger scandals to worry about.

Legitimation Crisis

Underlying the Paternoster Affair are certain moral assumptions which Prince Charles and the Modernists share: why worry about bending the rules of competitions, or using unequal power, whether of the media or, as architects do, professional influence? What matters is the result, the built environment, the excellence of the constructed architecture. There is a kind of ethical position behind this argument, a variant of the 'ends justify the means' or 'might makes right' which could be called the Nietzschean view of culture: 'beauty makes right'. At least creative work makes unethical behaviour more palatable.

If one thinks back to some of the compromises of Modern architects – Walter Gropius designing the Pan Am building in New York, or the Playboy Club in London – what makes these buildings particularly loathsome is their lack of aesthetics quality. The fact that the process of commissioning and designing may have been deeply compromised is deemed unimportant, since some good architecture, like St. Paul's Cathedral itself, results from compromise. Such moral relativism and ethical trade-offs reign in our time. They help explain why aesthetically scrupulous architects, such as Mies van der Rohe and Giuseppe Terragni, can design for the Nazis and Fascists, and even produce interesting works for these regimes. Power, even evil power, can be creative and beautiful and it is a long regretted truth that in many novels and plays the devil, is often more attractive and interesting than the angelic hero.

Furthermore, Modernism is built on the amoral Darwinian assumption that whatever functions successfully is right. 'A City built for speed', Le Corbusier said justifying his Ville Contemporaine, 'is built for success'. Utility, function, economic growth and power are the final goals of Modernism and they legitimate action. The way they are supported by a belief in the zeitgeist, or a fatalistic attitude towards the spirit of the age, is also apparent in any number of aphorisms. A typical pronouncement of Le Corbusier is 'Industry, overwhelming us like a flood which rolls on towards its destined ends ...'; another is Mies' 'the individual is losing significance; his destiny is no longer what interests us'. Such comments have been compared to the Nazi fatalism of Goebbels; 'It is the most essential principle of our victoriously conquering movement that the individual has been dethroned.'

Today, industry and social movements are less likely to be invoked as the demiurge than the consumerist dictate of fashion. But whatever the supposed necessity, in the absence of a higher authority it legitimates action. With no external measure of ethical behaviour, Modernism becomes anthropocentric and relativist. Whoever is powerful sets the agenda and judges the action.

There are several counters to this ethics of opportunism and aestheticism and I will mention three. First is the appeal to a fuller and deeper aesthetics, one which makes of morality itself a system of pleasure and discernment. After all the taste for ethical behaviour is, in several ways, like that for art. It takes cultivation and effort to appreciate moral distinctions just as it does any aesthetic language, and in the enjoying fine moral behaviour contributes to the aesthetic experience. If Prince Charles and architects are going to change their dubious activities it may not be because they suddenly understand they are violating some abstract principles of justice, but rather because they start understanding the higher pleasures of ethical behaviour, and how they are an integral part of their message.

Second, one may appeal to standards greater than a cultural agenda – Modernism or Traditionalism – such things as the truth of ecological balance and cosmic harmony. Is man is not the measure of all things, and sets a particularly low moral standard, then transcendent examples will have to be sought elsewhere as they have been in the past. Contemporary cosmology with its theory of the big bang and a violent universe may seem an unlikely place to look for human guidance, but it is here that post-modern theologians and scientists are looking for inspiration and I expect their surprising ideas and conclusions may provide an alternative anthropocentrism and its opportunism.

Verfasser: Charles Jencks
London / Los Angeles

University of California, Los Angeles
Graduate School of Architecture